

Learning and Planning at Cluster Reflection Meetings (part 1)

In its letter of 9 January 2001 introducing the Five Year Plan, the Universal House of Justice envisioned reflection meetings as periodic gatherings for consultation “to reflect on issues, consider adjustments, and maintain enthusiasm and unity of thought.” These would, along with other areawide gatherings, “support an intense process of action, consultation and learning.” By Ridván 2003, the Universal House of Justice could state that “Reflection meetings at the level of clusters have become a powerful means of unifying thought and action across institutions and localities; they have lent a potent stimulus to institutional and individual initiatives in a mutually supportive spirit.”

The January 2004 meeting of the Fako cluster in **Cameroon** provides a typical example of a cluster reflection meeting. It began with a well-planned devotional program and singing. News of events in the cluster since the previous meeting was shared and the statistics of the core activities were reviewed. These reports stimulated consultation and suggestions for how to improve and increase activities. Several individuals were inspired to pledge to start or restart study circles. After more singing, the administration of the cluster was discussed. The gathering was then divided into small groups in order to study and consult upon a collection of quotations specially selected for the occasion about “mobilizing the individual.” After a lunch together and more singing, the friends discussed clusterwide numerical goals for the core activities and then broke into their respective communities to discuss how to achieve these. More pledges to carry out activities were made and a comprehensive three-month plan for the cluster was then set out in a chart, incorporating the pledges. The meeting concluded with an inspiring talk. In all, 76 people from seven communities participated.

From experience worldwide since the start of the Plan, it appears that two factors contribute directly to the success of cluster reflection meetings. First, the training institute needs to be at a fairly advanced stage of development. In areas where reflection meetings are established before the institute is fully operating, the meetings are often characterized by confusion about their purpose, a top-down approach by the administrative agency hosting the gathering, and inability to generate individual initiative. Second, an adequate degree of attention to planning and preparation is required for the meetings to fulfill the purpose set out for them by the House of Justice. While there is no definitive format for the gatherings, elements that seem to contribute to their success include joint study of the current guidance from the Bahá’í World Centre; sharing of exciting stories about successful initiatives to establish core activities and involve non-Bahá’ís; planning in small groups for the months ahead; creating a calendar of activities by compiling the proposed voluntary initiatives of individuals and groups; the involvement of youth; and the effective use of the arts.

In various clusters around the world, new insights are being gained about the implementation of cluster meetings.

- The natives of **Kiribati** have long had a tradition of gathering in the village meeting house (*maneaba*), so holding cluster reflection meetings in the South Tarawa cluster came naturally to them. From participation in the reflection meetings a significant percentage of the believers now have a united vision for the institute process and strongly support it.

- In the İzmir cluster in **Turkey**, the friends compiled an inventory of the institute courses already completed, then made arrangements to establish study circles for the specific books they needed to study to finish the entire sequence. Teams were also formed to invite believers who had not yet become involved in the institute process to participate in the core activities.
- Prior to a reflection meeting in the Adelaide cluster of **Australia**, it was noted that the friends in that area were taking a long time to move through the entire sequence of courses. It became clear during consultation and examination of the cluster statistics that the localities in which members of the Local Spiritual Assemblies were participating in study circles were the ones where the friends were moving most quickly through the sequence. This new understanding led to the inauguration of a campaign to encourage other members of Local Spiritual Assemblies in the cluster to complete the sequence.
- Communities are learning how to make reflection meetings joyful and fun, especially through the arts. Music is an integral part of many reflection meetings but dramatic skits, PowerPoint presentations, and role-playing are increasingly being used as well. The Lugari cluster in **Kenya** devised a game with questions and answers about the document “Building Momentum,” which was played during a reflection meeting.
- **Nepal** reports that youth are taking a leading role in reflection meetings. For example, the youth of the Sunsari cluster not only organize and participate in the reflection meeting, they also visit the friends ahead of time in order to encourage and educate them about the importance of reflection meetings.

Revitalizing Reflection Meetings and Enhancing Learning—Victoria, Australia

The following report was received about efforts to improve reflection meetings in Victoria:

Victoria has two priority clusters, Vic 1 and Vic 3, each with 9 or 10 Assemblies, an Institute Board, and three Auxiliary Board members, and a population of 1.1–1.2 million each. The profiles of these clusters show that all have made good progress in human resource development and core activities. The conditions set by the Universal House of Justice in its 9 January message for starting intensive programs of growth in clusters like these are promising and are developing. What has been lacking in these clusters has been the existence of effective cluster reflection meetings. We have not been able to hold a meeting at the cluster level that generates enthusiasm, explores possibilities, and encourages the friends to more action. Particularly, we have not been able to plan at the cluster level and turn the plan into a calendar of events, a document that can be shared with the friends in the cluster.

The friends in the clusters set out to improve their reflection gatherings. The reorganized programs included

- Study of the 17 January [2003] message
- Sharing the achievements of the communities in three core activities with some exciting and artistic stories, including music and singing
- Planning for three core activities, trying to multiply
- Calendar of events for three months—full of study circles, intensive institute campaigns (spiritual holidays), devotional meetings and children classes

The meetings produced the following results:

Reflection Meeting in Vic 3 cluster. A young lady (an assistant), who was fantastic, carried out chairing of the meeting. This meeting was attended by 109 adult and 50 youth and children (all left with a plan in hand). Everyone was happy, excited and eager to serve. Individual and collective actions were the outcome and they included 60 registrations for various books for the intensive institute program during the forthcoming holidays, 20 new devotional meetings, 1 new children's class, and 500 little firesides, five/individual. A full calendar of events was prepared, which will be sent to all communities in the cluster.

Reflection Meeting in Vic 1 cluster. Chairing was shared among 4–5 youth, who were great. This meeting was attended by 100 adults and 20 youth and children (all left with a plan in hand). There were no negative comments or criticism. Everyone seemed happy and wanting to serve. Individual and collective actions included 50 new devotional meetings, playgroups and children's classes, 10 new study circles, and 20 registrations for intensive courses during holidays.

We drew the following conclusions from this experience:

- Effective cluster reflection meetings that inspire friends into action are possible.
- Cluster reflection meeting has a purpose, which needs to be fulfilled to be effective; it is not just a meeting of believers, it is a planning meeting at the cluster level for individual initiative to take place for the advancement of the process of entry by troops.
- Study of the World Centre guidance is essential.
- Real and effective collaboration between all institutions has to take place for organizing the meeting.
- Art, music, drama, and stories are essential.
- It is a meeting for everyone and not top-down; the feeling of ownership is important.
- Preparation for the meeting is most important; quantitative and qualitative analysis needs to be done beforehand and shared in the meeting.
- Invitations are a key element in preparation.
- Chairing is very important; the youth did a fantastic job chairing the meetings.
- Involvement of the youth and children adds so much.
- Involvement of all the friends and communities is important.
- Regional institute coordinators need to be present and prepared to cater for the needs of those who would like to study more courses.
- Transforming suggestions and individual and collective plans into a calendar of events is exciting and inspiring; this encourages everyone to undertake individual and collective action.

Stimulating Initiative and Multiplying Core Activities—Vancouver, Canada

One important contribution of reflection meetings has been to cultivate the understanding and commitment of the friends to multiply core activities. Most reflection meetings involve pledging by volunteers to undertake core activities within the next few months. The cluster of Vancouver, *Canada*, developed an innovative way to make this exercise fun and visually stimulating. One visitor to the cluster wrote the following description of the process.

A word about the pledge session: there were four trees drawn on posters all hanging from one of the walls. People were sitting down, facing this wall. The trees had branches, but

there was nothing on the branches. The four posters represented four trees: one each for May, June, July, and August. The Auxiliary Board member said, “What do you see on the trees?” People responded, “Nothing!” The Board member then commented, “We’re going to give these trees life!” Then he showed us how. He had cut up papers, in four different colors, with each color paper symbolizing something different. They included

- Purple flowers for study circles
- Green leaves for devotional gatherings
- Yellow birds for children classes
- Red apples for firesides

The Board member invited individuals to write their names or their families’ names on whatever paper they wished and place it on the branches of a tree. He then explained that each branch had a number to it and each number represented the day of the month. Thus, if a person got a green leaf for a devotional gathering and placed it on branch number 1, tree number 2, that meant they would offer a devotional gathering on the first day of July. A poster for May was displayed so people who were already doing something could place their respective papers on the branches for May. The point here was that this is a cluster that is already engaged and is building on its strengths. Before we knew it, the trees were filled up with all of the colors. The trees had life now! We saw right before our very own eyes an imaginative process of creating a calendar of activities to be held in the next few months. I was especially moved to see that one of the first people to place a pledge on the tree was the area training institute coordinator.

Planning Made Easy in the Reflection Meeting—Sumgait, Azerbaijan

Sumgait is an upcoming cluster community that has grown in size and dynamism in the past few years as a result of systematic institute activities. The Area Teaching Committee of Sumgait had prepared an interesting program for the reflection meeting that included a presentation on the achievements during the Five Year Plan and a simple method for planning.

A “pyramid” drawn on a sheet of paper showed the number of friends who had already completed various institute courses, and a row of boxes at the bottom of the sheet contained the number of core activities. The Auxiliary Board member and the institute coordinator presented the report, and asked the friends how many would be able to advance through the sequence of courses in the next three months. Almost all the participants, around 30 believers, were eager to move on and complete one or more courses. A new pyramid was drawn, for filling in goal numbers. For example, if five friends wanted to study Book 3, “+ 5” would be added to that line. The institute coordinator quickly assigned tutors for all the upcoming study circles. This included study circles for Book 1 with seekers.

The Board member then asked if the friends would like to initiate children’s classes and devotional meetings, beyond the ones that are currently held. Several hands went up quickly, and a new row of figures indicated the goals for core activities. The institute coordinator and the Board member then obtained more information about the new pledges, so that a calendar of activities could be prepared and sent to all at a later date.

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